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ABSTRACT

Noting that teaching assistants (TAs) play a particularly important role in speech communication, this paper reviews and categorizes relevant communication research from 1979 to 1991. The paper notes that research by speech communication scholars relevant to communication in teaching assistant training falls into three categories: studies specifically investigating communication factors in TA training and development; descriptions of and prescriptions for TA training programs; and theoretical explorations into TA training and development. The paper briefly discusses a number of communication factors (grouped around the developmental level and communication characteristics of the TA, socialization factors, and the TA's relationship with supervisory and other faculty members) that are particularly significant for further investigation. The paper concludes with suggested methodological approaches and theoretical perspectives that should be used to guide speech communication scholars in future programmatic research on TA training. (Contains 48 references.) (RS)

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A Review of Communication Research on Graduate Teaching Assistants

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Abstract

Teaching assistants play a particularly important role in speech communication: teaching assistantships are a way future faculty learn to teach, and a way departments staff lower-division courses. This essay reviews and categorizes relevant communication research from 1979 to 1991, and proposes factors which hold promise for further study. Research is needed into the factors involved in the development of an effective university TA training program, and the role of communication in the professional development of TAs.

A Review of Communication Research on Graduate Teaching Assistants

Graduate teaching assistants (TAs) play a major role in university education, both as teachers and developing scholars. The graduate teaching assistantship is central to the preparation of the next generation of the professoriate. "Although not all TAs will become professors, virtually all professors have been TAs and report that, however limited it may have been, this experience remains the major preparation for their teaching responsibilities" (Nyquist, Abbott, Wulff & Sprague, 1991, p. xi). Becoming a TA is "the first step in professional role development, providing a place where an individual can learn the craft of teaching as well as experiencing the unique social structure of the academy" (Darling & Dewey, 1990). If the teaching assistantship is the primary way future faculty members learn to teach, then the academy must pay careful attention to the training and supervision of TAs.

But the importance of TAs to higher education is certainly not limited to their future impact. TAs play a major role in undergraduate education. As assistants, TAs perform many of the teacher's functions, including lecturing, leading discussions, managing the classroom, tutoring, giving feedback on class projects, and assigning grades. But TAs often function as far more than mere assistants. It is not uncommon for graduate teaching assistants to serve as classroom instructors of record. In many institutions, TAs account for 25 to 38 percent of undergraduate instruction (Nyquist, Abbott, Wulff & Sprague, 1991).

Graduate teaching assistants are particularly important within speech communication. Not only is the teaching assistantship a primary way future speech communication faculty members learn to teach, but it is also a key way many departments staff multiple sections of introductory public speaking,

interpersonal and small-group communication courses. As a discipline, speech communication relies heavily on TAs (Buerkel-Rothfuss & Gray, 1990). Speech communication departments routinely assign TAs responsibility as teachers of record for class sections (Sprague & Nyquist, 1990). In a recent national survey (Buerkel-Rothfuss & Gray, 1990), TA-taught sections accounted for a mean of 22.7 percent of the student credit hours generated by speech communication departments. In more than 10 percent of the departments TAs accounted for half or more of the total credit hours generated. One department reported that TAs were responsible for 95 percent of its credit hours.

TAs are clearly important to the discipline of speech communication. And communication scholars have much to offer in the development of effective TA training programs, not only for our specific discipline, but across the campus. Communication is central to the role of the TA as TA on the university campus.

Allen and Reuter (1990) identified four categories of roles TAs are expected to perform. TAs' instructional roles include lecturing, leading discussions, making assignments, and asking questions--duties that involve direct interaction with students in classroom settings. Interactive roles, which involve interaction with students outside the classroom, include providing feedback on student projects, giving advice, tutoring, and counseling. Institutional roles, which "are largely defined by the rules and customs of individual institutions" (Allen & Reuter, 1990, p. 22), include being an office mate, a member of a course staff, and a citizen of the university. The fourth category encompasses the TA's administrative roles, including planning, grading, and keeping records.

Communication is a major component in three of the four categories: instructional, interactive, and institutional. As research in instructional

communication has demonstrated, communication is an important part of what goes on in the classroom. This can be expected to hold true whether the teacher in the classroom is a full professor or a TA. TAs, like other teachers, cannot engage in direct interaction with students in classroom settings without communicating. Nor could a TA or other teacher engage in direct interaction with students outside the classroom--what Allen and Reuter (1990) call interactive roles--without communication being a significant element. Communication is certainly not all there is to tutoring, counseling, and providing feedback. But it is clearly an important part of these interactions. Too, communication is a part of at least some of the TA's institutional roles, including sharing the responsibilities of being a member of a department, and working with other persons on a course staff. Communication is less than central only in the TA's administrative roles.

But where research from communication scholars interested in TA issues is most urgently needed is into the role of communication in the professional development of TAs. The wealth of research in communication and instruction (see Staton-Spicer & Wulff, 1984) demonstrates the significance of communication in the teaching-learning process. Research into TA socialization (Darling, 1987, 1990; Darling & Staton, 1989; Staton & Darling, 1989; Darling & Dewey, 1990) and the development of professional role commitment among graduate students (Weiss, 1981) illustrates the centrality of communication in the development of future faculty members in any discipline. This research suggests that the types of messages new TAs receive about their role from more experienced TAs and faculty members are significant in their development as scholars.

But not enough is known about how communication functions in that professional development. Recent discussions of TA development and supervision (Sprague & Nyquist, 1989, 1990, 1991; Chism, 1991) have suggested

the importance of the communication between TA and supervisor. But there is little research investigating that relationship, or the many other communication factors involved in the development of an effective university TA training program. The next section will review the relevant extant research conducted by scholars in speech communication, and propose a number of key communication factors which hold promise for further study.

Speech communication research relevant to TA training

In a review of research on TA training prior to 1980, Carroll (1980) suggested there was a significant lack of research dealing specifically with training TAs. Much more effort, Carroll (1980) said, should be "devoted to assessing the effects of TA training programs rather than simply describing innovative ways of conducting such programs" (p. 176). In their "Review of Research on TA Training" from 1980 through 1988, Abbott, Wulff, and Szego (1989) found that "empirical research on TA training is still lacking" (p. 120).

Much of the research in the area of communication and instruction can apply to TAs as well as other, "regular" teachers. In 1984 Staton-Spicer and Wulff provided a descriptive examination of research in the area. They organized the 186 articles from 1974 through 1982 into six categories: teacher characteristics, student characteristics, teaching strategies, speech criticism and student evaluation, speech content, and speech communication programs. Several of the categories, including teacher and student characteristics, teaching strategies, and speech criticism and student evaluation, have significance for TA development. For example, research into teacher characteristics could be expected to apply as well to speech communication TAs, who are in fact most often teachers of record rather than assistants. But none of the studies specifically addressed TA development.

The recent research by speech communication scholars relevant to communication in TA training can be found to fall into three categories: studies specifically investigating communication factors in TA training and development; descriptions of and prescriptions for TA training programs; and theoretical explorations into TA training and development. The essay surveys research from 1979, the publication date of the earliest research located which dealt specifically with speech communication and TA training, to mid-1991. The sources reviewed include speech communication journals (most notably Communication Education), papers identified by the TA training task force of the Educational Research Information Clearinghouse, journals such as College Teaching, the two issues of Jossey-Bass's New Directions for Teaching and Learning series that deal with TAs (Andrews, 1983; Nyquist, Abbott, & Wulff, 1989), and the books that developed out of the first two national conventions on the training and employment of teaching assistants (Chism, 1987; Nyquist, Abbott, Wulff, & Sprague, 1991). Bibliographic references in the surveyed articles, chapters, and papers were also sought out.

Research on Communication Factors

The research identified which specifically investigated communication factors in TA training and development can be grouped into four divisions: studies examining TA socialization; studies considering TA communication with their students; research specifically dealing with communication and the international TA; and research into TA perceptions concerning training.

TA Socialization

The socialization research examines the complex process of becoming a TA. Five studies which explore TA socialization were identified: Darling, 1987; Darling & Staton, 1989; Kirk & Todd-Mancillas, 1989; Staton & Darling, 1989; and Darling & Dewey, 1990. Socialization, which includes role and

cultural socialization, "occurs through a process of communication--that is, new TAs learn how to understand and work with their new colleagues, enact the role of advanced student, fulfill the responsibilities of a teacher, and develop values and beliefs about the academic profession while observing, sharing, and responding to messages in the new environment" (Staton & Darling, 1989, pp. 17-18).

Darling and Dewey (1990) examined the ways peer leaders affect the socialization of new TAs. Darling (1987) found that new TAs are more likely to share their real concerns and experiences with each other than with more experienced people in the department, and use information and advice garnered through informal daily interactions more than they do the more traditional and formal resources. Darling and Staton (1989) found that TAs are exposed to thematic messages about what it means to be a TA, that they experienced difficulties trying to use those messages to guide their behavior, and that they employed information-seeking strategies in response to their specific problems. Kirk and Todd-Mancillas (1989) used interviews with TAs to describe turning points signaling an intensifying identification with their departments and with their roles in the academy.

Socialization occurs through communication. These studies shed light on the complex communicative process by which TAs develop role and cultural identification as TAs and as developing scholars.

TA Communication with Students

Three studies (O'Hair & Babich, 1981; Tomita & McDowell, 1981; and Unger-Gallagher, 1991) were identified which considered TA communication with their students. Two (O'Hair & Babich, 1981; Tomita & McDowell, 1981) examined TA characteristics as factors affecting student ratings of TAs. O'Hair and Babich (1981) investigated the relationship between speech communication TAs'

awareness of affective components of classroom behavior--their receptivity to the communication of affect in the classroom --and the student ratings they earned. The study indicated that TAs may be perceived as more effective with greater affective awareness. Tomita and McDowell (1981) investigated the relationship between gender scale scores of TAs from various disciplines and student ratings on questions including the quality of communication between TA and student.

Unger-Gallagher (1991) analyzed of some of the power dynamics and issues of role relationships that arise when TAs interact with undergraduates, especially when they take on the teaching style of facilitator instead of commander.

Communication and the International TA

Two studies (Bauer, 1991; and Nelson, 1991) were identified which specifically examined communication and the international TA. Bauer (1991) sought to determine international TAs' concerns about their abilities to communicate with U.S. undergraduate students in the U.S. university instructional setting. In her pilot study she isolated ten categories of instructional communication concerns for international TAs, including concerns about pronunciation and grammar, vocabulary use, clarity of expression to ensure student understanding, and understanding and responding to student questions.

Nelson (1991) found that students tend to experience less uncertainty, have a more positive attitude, and recall more when international TAs use personal examples from their own cultures instead of hypothetical examples to illustrate points. Although Nelson is a scholar in linguistics and English as a second language, her study was included because it was based on uncertainty reduction theory, developed by communication scholars Berger and Calabrese

(1975), and Berger's (1979) conclusion that self-disclosure is a method of reducing uncertainty among Americans.

TA Perceptions About Their Training

In an attempt to assess the needs of TAs, Gray and Buerkel-Rothfuss (1991) surveyed perceptions of experienced TAs concerning training. The TAs surveyed indicated a desire for training, and placed a higher emphasis on interaction-based activities (such as giving and accepting criticism, handling upset students, and establishing authority) as topics for attention in a TA training program. Although the TAs did value training, they did not express marked satisfaction with any particular part of the training they received.

Programs in which TAs receive training are the focus of the next category of research.

Descriptions of/Prescriptions for TA Training Programs

Seven prescriptions for and descriptions of TA development programs by speech communication scholars were identified (DeBoar, 1979; Staton-Spicer & Nyquist, 1979; Andrews, 1983; Trank, 1986; Nyquist & Wulff, 1987; Sequeira & Darling, 1987; and Darling & Dewey, 1991). Also included in this category is a discussion of present programs, the minimum training needed, and a model for an ideal TA development program (Buerkel-Rothfuss & Gray, 1990).

Andrews (1983) and Trank (1986) both called for a departmental climate supportive of TAs and their development. Trank (1986)--who wants to ban the words "training" and "supervising" in relation to TAs and substitute "teaching" and "advising"--said the first step for a TA professional development program to be successful is to create a departmental atmosphere in which TAs are "truly accepted and valued as colleagues."

Darling and Dewey (1991) call for a new perspective of scholarship, focusing on the process of inquiry that underlies both teaching and research.

They suggest three principles for TA training programs to follow: first, since knowledge is socially constructed, they argue, the program should feature commitments to a particular learning community, and be built around stable and structures working groups. Second, the TA training program should recognize the importance of personally experienced knowledge, and work to structure and enhance reflective behavior. Third, the program should focus both on training--preparing an individual for specific duties--and role development, paying attention to the professional decision-making process. This essay might well have also fit into the third category, theoretical explorations into the TA training and development process. But, since Darling and Dewey also describe the application of their principles in a specific program, it was placed in this category.

Nyquist and Wulff (1987) describe discipline-specific training with support from a university-wide Center for Instructional Development and Research (CIDR). Sequeira and Darling (1986) describe a flexible "multiperspective" approach to training international TAs within CIDR.

Buerkel-Rothfuss and Gray (1990) begin their report with a description of the current state of TA training programs, based on their surveys of graduate deans and departmental administrators. They describe what surveyed TAs said their training needs were, and then move from that empirical description to proposing what an ideal program might be like.

Buerkel-Rothfuss and Gray (1990) argue that an ideal TA training program would combine department-based with university-wide training "to present universal teaching concepts/strategies/ skills . . . by university specialists who are experts in the areas selected as well as role models for quality teaching" (p. 13). Communication considerations in this part might include motivating students, creating interest in course content, lecturing, leading discussions and activities, classroom performance, interpersonal climate, and

providing feedback. The university specialists would serve as consultants throughout the year for the departmental trainers. Departmental training would have four goals: discussion and application of concepts introduced in the university-wide training; work with specific issues relevant to each discipline and course; skill development for TAs; and development of a strong relationship between TAs and the department, particularly those responsible for TA training and supervision.

Like Andrews (1983) and Trank (1986), Buerkel-Rothfuss and Gray (1990) stress the need for departmental support: not only for the person responsible for TA training and supervision, but for the training process, and for the importance of teaching itself. In a survey, Buerkel-Rothfuss and Gray (1990) report that department chairs/heads "indicated that lack of faculty support for training and the attitude that research is more important than teaching are major stumbling blocks to quality departmental training" (p. 25).

Like Buerkel-Rothfuss and Gray (1990) and Dewey and Darling (1991), the authors in the third category, theoretical explorations into TA training and development, offer proposals and principles to guide TA programs. These studies were categorized separately because they are more critical in nature, and do not deal with specific departmental programs.

Theoretical Explorations

Faculty members responsible for TA training and supervision face a dual burden: not only must they prepare individual TAs to take on their immediate instructional responsibilities, but they must also facilitate the TA's long-term professional development.

The question for the TA supervisor is how best to do that. Sprague and Nyquist (1991) draw from the literature of cognitive development, professional development, and teacher education to urge supervisors to take a developmental

perspective in their relationships with TAs. They identify three general phases of TA development (senior learner, colleague in training and junior colleague), and suggest that supervisors emphasize the role of manager in the first phase, educational role model in the second, and professional mentor in the third (Sprague & Nyquist, 1989). They offer four questions for supervisors to consider in gathering information about where individual TAs are in their development and what leadership and interventions are most appropriate: Are their communication concerns primarily about self, task, or impact? How sophisticated are they in thinking about their discipline? How do they relate to authority? And how do they relate to their students? (Sprague & Nyquist, 1991) Although "a wide scale implementation of the developmental perspective could require a radical re-thinking of our graduate and undergraduate programs and of our departments' staffing policies" (Sprague & Nyquist, 1990, p. 10), the authors also suggest "realistic first steps that can be taken to acknowledge the developmental needs of our future colleagues" (p. 10).

Darling (1990) argues for a reconceptualization of the TA position that thinks and talks not about TAs but prospective scholars, "a role which encompasses (rather than attaches to) a teaching mission" (p. 13). The teaching and research elements of the role are learned comprehensively, not separately. "Entering a role in a department is best described as entering a discourse community; the ways in which that community talk about the role and focus upon the role influence how individuals learn the role" (p. 23).

Galvin (1991) deals with classroom communication skills for TAs. She proposes that TAs create interactive learning communities in their classrooms. The process involves four steps: building a climate for interactive communication, creating an appropriate physical and temporal context, developing teacher communication competence, and managing contingencies which

influence the process. Communication plays a significant role in each step. "An interactive climate is built on the exchange of congruent messages explicitly designed to foster class discussion behaviors such as questioning, sharing opinions, expressing feelings, supporting or disagreeing with others" (p. 264). Nonverbal aspects such as seating arrangements and time management are significant parts of establishing a favorable context. Teacher communication competencies include effective questioning, nonverbal immediacy and regulators that give the floor to students, and interpersonal skills such as self-disclosure, listening, and openness. Critical contingencies in the interactive classroom include gender, communication apprehension, and cultural issues.

The lack of empirical research on TA training that Abbott, Wulff, and Szego (1989) found is especially noticeable when one looks for studies investigating the role of communication in graduate TA training. Scholars in speech communication have, like their colleagues across the campus, done much more describing and prescribing programs than investigating the effectiveness of those programs. This is not to suggest that thorough description of thoughtful and innovative TA development programs is a bad thing; on the contrary, discussion of model programs can make an important contribution to the improvement of professional development programs for TAs in speech communication and other disciplines. But how is the faculty member newly assigned to train and supervise TAs to judge the effectiveness of the programs? How is that person to determine which elements of which programs seem most promising to meet the individual needs of the TAs he/she is assigned to train? In short, how is one to know what works well in a model program and what does not?

The research reviewed, from empirical studies to theoretical explorations, reaffirms the importance of communication in the professional

development of TAs. The next step is to identify some key communication variables which hold promise for further study.

Key Communication Factors

The research reviewed above confirms the complex nature of the TA professional development process. A number of communication factors emerge as particularly significant for further investigation.

The developmental level of the individual TA will have a major impact on the effects of various types of training and supervision. Sprague and Nyquist (1990, 1991) suggest four key factors which can be used to gain a picture of a TA's developmental level: communication concerns, critical thinking about the discipline, relationship to authority, and relationship to students. An awareness of the hallmarks of typical turning points in TA socialization and development is important in furthering professional development.

Assessment of the TA's developmental level should have an impact on the responsible faculty member's supervisory role or style. This raises the broader question of the relationship between TA and faculty in general--not just with the TA supervisor. Andrews (1983), Trank (1986), and Buerkel-Rothfuss and Gray (1990) stress the importance of a supportive climate to TA development.

The thematic messages TAs receive and how they process them as they are socialized are also significant. More insight into how individual TAs privilege informal information and advice can contribute to the development of effective training and supervision programs.

Other TA characteristics also hold promise for further study, including their interpersonal skills, especially in the classroom; communication apprehension; and sensitivity to cultural and gender issues.

The next section will suggest methodological approaches and theoretical perspectives which should be used to guide speech communication scholars in future programmatic research on TA training.

Future Communication Research on TA Training

The review of research conducted by speech communication scholars into TA training revealed a number of key communication factors which hold promise for future research. These factors can be grouped around the developmental level and communication characteristics of the TA, socialization factors, and the TA's relationship with supervisory and other faculty members.

TA training and other instructional communication research can be placed within three dominant 20th century philosophical traditions: logical empiricism or positivism, interpretive theories (including analytical, phenomenological, and hermeneutic), and critical theory (Friedrich, 1987). Much of the research on TA training is rooted in logical positivism, and employed quantitative research methods and statistical designs (Abbott, Wulff, & Szego, 1989). The research generally falls within the preoperational/process/product framework, which frames questions of instructional effectiveness in terms of three distinct and consecutive stages dealing with teacher characteristics, the teacher's classroom behavior, and learner outcomes (Staton-Spicer & Marty-White, 1981; Staton-Spicer, 1982).

Research into TA training and development from this perspective can contribute to a growing and needed knowledge base. But "there are critical qualitative dimensions that must be examined with methods other than observation instruments, rating scales, and attitude measures" (Staton-Spicer, 1982, p. 37). In order to more fully understand the process of professional development in prospective scholars in all its great complexity, researchers must adopt an interpretive perspective and employ qualitative research methods.

Staton-Spicer (1982) outlines two theoretical approaches behind qualitative inquiry: the naturalistic-ecological perspective, and the constructivist-phenomenological perspective. The assumption underlying the naturalistic-ecological perspective is that since the setting exerts a strong influence on human behavior, behavior must be studied in natural settings as unobtrusively as possible. This perspective emphasizes the complexity of the environment, and involves detailed observation of naturally occurring behavior in a field setting.

The constructivist-phenomenological perspective assumes that people are knowing beings who behave in purposive ways, and that humans can organize and understand complex communications and take on complex social roles. Researchers seek to understand the meaning individuals assign to events and their own behavior. Researchers from this perspective observe both behavior and events, then use interviews to seek participant articulation of the intentions behind behavior and events.

Darling, Staton, and the others involved in TA socialization research have made significant use of this approach. But there is a real need for more. In discussing implications of their developmental model for TA training, Sprague and Nyquist (1990) call for descriptive studies of the actual changes TAs in speech communication go through. Not only do we need to know more about TA development, socialization, the styles of TA supervisors, the diverse needs of undergraduates, and the constraining characteristics of university culture, but we need to understand how these factors--and all the dimensions of the TA experience--are interrelated (Nyquist, Abbott & Wulff, 1989). There is a real need for scholars in speech communication to embark on systematic programs of investigation into the role of communication in the complex process of the development of our future faculty members.

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